chirps

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by microbiologistmusings

Summary

Dana runs a kitty sanctuary.

One of her long-term charges is an angry little orange asshole named Jack.

She assumes life on the street and the loss of his leg has rendered Jack angry and bitter for the rest of his life — until a Maine Coon named Robby gets dropped off.

Notes

Enjoy!

The bell over the cat sanctuary door gives a small, tired ring when they bring Robby in. The carrier strains under his weight, plastic creaking, his fur pressed against the small grates like fog against glass. Dana leans forward, frowning. She can already see the shape of him — huge, slow-moving, the kind of cat that looks more like a pillow than a pet. The woman who drops him off doesn't stay long. "We just… can't afford it," She sighs, not meeting Dana's eyes. "He's purebred. They said he'd be healthy." A short, helpless laugh. "He's *not*."

Then she's gone. The air in the lobby feels heavier after the door shuts on her abandonment. Dana kneels, opens the carrier, and Robby steps out like a cloud rolling downhill. His fur is a tangle of old luxury — a warm chocolate brown with a faint curl, silky in patches, matted in others, oozing the scent of expensive litter and neglect. His eyes are tired gold coins, blinking slowly, as if he's trying to remember what it means to be somewhere new. He's enormous, even thin as he is, his paws look like they were carved for a lion. But his body tells the story of illness — ribs too visible under his coat, a vague limp when he moves, a strange wheeze in his chest; the product of backyard unsafe breeding no doubt. Dana runs a hand along his back, whispering nonsense. He leans into the touch for a moment, then *droops*, the weight of himself too much.

Now the problem: *where to put him.*

Every enclosure is full. The healthy cats don't need to be near him — the risk is too high until the vet clears him. The sick ones are fragile, too small for a creature like this and then, there's *Jack*. Dana glances down the row of enclosures to the last one, where Jack's nameplate is half peeled off the metal. The pissed off tomcat is awake, as always, glaring at the world. He's a scarred shadow of a cat, burnt orange, compact and furious, his tail flicking like a whip. He lost his back leg before he ever came here, and somewhere along the line, he lost the idea that anything could be kind with it. He's bitten through two gloves, shredded three towels, and terrified every cat they've ever tried to pair him with.

Dana sighs. "This is a terrible idea." But she lifts Robby in her arms anyway, straining a little at his weight, feeling the deep vibration of his asthmatic lungs. She carries him to Jack's enclosure. Jack's already up, tail lashing, one paw thumping the ground in a rhythm that means

don't you dare. "It's just for a minute," Dana tells him, as if that ever mattered to a cat. "Just let him rest in here for a little while."

She sets Robby down. Jack's ears flatten. Robby looks around, bewildered but calm, like a bear waking from hibernation. Jack opens his mouth — the hiss is right there, Dana can feel it coming — but instead, he makes a sound no one's heard from him before: a low, rumbling *purr*.

Dana blinks, she didn't think Jack was capable of anything but growls or hisses.

Jack steps forward on his three legs and bumps his head into Robby's chest. *Once. Twice*. Then, shockingly gentle, he *licks* Robby's fur — a rasping, careful motion over a patch of matted fuzz. Robby doesn't move away. He blinks slowly too, then lowers his massive head and leans against the smaller cat. For a second, Dana thinks she's dreaming. Jack, the untouchable, the terror of the sanctuary, has melted into this big, sad creature like it's the most natural thing in the world.

Dana shakes her head, half laughing, half stunned. "Huh," She sighs softly. "Didn't know you had it in you, Jack."

Jack doesn't answer. He's too busy purring against Robby's chest, his one back leg twitching with something that looks almost like contentment. Robby, huge and tired, closes his eyes and lets himself be held by this broken little thing.

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Dana keeps waiting for it to fall apart. Every morning when she unlocks the front door, she braces for the sound of them — the yowl of a fight, the rattle of claws against metal, the crash that means two cats have decided they hate each other again. It's almost routine at this point, the little flinch of her shoulders when she steps into the quiet.

But the quiet stays. Days pass, and not a single hiss. No fur torn, no bowls overturned, no bloodied towels. It's almost eerie, like the world has gone too still around that enclosure in particular. Dana tells herself she's being silly — maybe Jack just hasn't decided to detonate yet, maybe he's saving it up for a big one.

Then one morning she walks by their enclosure and stops dead. Her brain can't process what she's looking at. The big round bed in the

corner — the soft, ridiculous one with the faux fur cheetah-print lining that Jack has always ignored with contempt — is full. But not in the usual way. It looks overstuffed, like someone jammed a whole pillow into it. Robby's enormous body fills every inch of the bed, fur spilling over the edges like an avalanche of fluff. His head rests on the rim, his ears twitching faintly, and his breathing comes in deep, slow waves.

Dana frowns. "How did you even *fit* in there, big guy?" She chuckles, leaning closer.

Then she notices the second shape. At first, it's just a patch of orange fur, a strange ripple near Robby's chest. But when she squints, she sees the outline — small, compact, half-buried. *Jack*. Practically disappeared inside Robby's fur, his face pressed deep against the bigger cat's ruff. His one back leg is twitching in sleep, his ears relaxed. He looks… delighted. There's no other word for it. Utterly, blissfully delighted, like he's found the safest place in the universe and never intends to leave it; to leave *him*.

Dana can't help it — she laughs under her breath.

Robby stirs at the noise but doesn't move much, only shifts his tail around Jack's side, enclosing him further, as if shielding him from the world. The gesture is so gentle it hurts to watch. Dana feels something loosen in her chest, something she didn't even know was tight. Jack, who once treated every living thing like an enemy, is now purring into a mountain of fur. Robby, who came here unwanted and ill, is finally warm, his huge frame curled protectively around the one creature who decided he was worth loving.

Dana stands there for a long moment, just watching. The hum of the sanctuary goes on around her — the rustle of litter being changed, the faint mew of a kitten in the next room, the low chatter of volunteers. But it all feels far away. Inside that little square of enclosure, something fragile and astonishing has taken root.

They've *bonded*.

Dana's not sure when it happened. At first, it's just small things she notices — the way Robby always positions himself between Jack and the glass when people walk by, as if shielding him from prying eyes. The way Jack, who used to bite any hand that lingered too long, now presses his face into Robby's mane and disappears. It's a rhythm now: eat together, nap together, groom each other. Still, Dana tells herself

it's just companionship — the strange, animal version of roommates who finally get along, until the morning she walks in with their breakfast and sees it.

Robby is sitting up, that enormous tail wrapped neatly around his paws. Jack is sprawled on his side in front of him, fur sticking out every which way, eyes half-closed in bliss and Robby — slow, deliberate, solemn — is grooming Jack's back leg. Jack's *stump*. Dana freezes. The bowl in her hand tilts slightly; a few kibbles tumble onto the floor. Jack has never allowed anyone near that stump. Not the vet, not Dana, not even a brush. He used to lash out the second anyone looked too long — a wild, terrified thing, convinced touch meant pain. The fur there has never grown back right, patchy and coarse, a reminder of whatever he survived before he came here.

But now — now he's *purring*. Deeply, steadily, a low sound that vibrates through the room. Robby's tongue moves carefully, each stroke is patient, loving. Jack doesn't flinch. He just leans into it, eyes closed, his whole body melting into the moment.

Dana feels a lump rise in her throat.

She stands very still, afraid to interrupt, afraid that sound or movement might break whatever spell is holding them. The air between the two cats feels charged, in a way she doesn't have words for. Not just friendship. Not just comfort. Something quieter and sweeter, they're in love, she's certain of it.

When Robby finishes, he presses his nose gently against the healed scars, as if sealing them. Jack rolls onto his back and bats at Robby's chin, his claws soft and sheathed, a kitten's gesture from a cat who hasn't been a kitten in a long, long time.

Dana sets the food bowls down inside the enclosure without a sound. Jack doesn't even look over. Robby glances up at her for half a second — those heavy gold eyes calm, certain — and then turns back to Jack, licking between his ears.

Dana leaves them to it.

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The vet says it gently: *Robby's kidneys are in rough shape. His joints are swollen, and his lungs sound like flypaper when he breathes.* Years of bad breeding and worse care have stacked up inside him like rot in a beam. He needs medication every day, fluids, and careful feeding.

“He’ll need rest,” The vet adds, “— and maybe isolation for a bit, at least until we stabilize him.”

Dana nods. It’s the logical choice. The professional choice. But her stomach sinks like a stone. She already knows what “isolation” means: *separating him from Jack.*

That night, she waits until the sanctuary is quiet. The other cats are languidly dozing, the lights dimmed to a sleepy gold. In the far enclosure, Robby and Jack are curled together in their usual heap — a mountain of fur with a single twitching ear visible. Robby’s breathing is rough, a low rumble that sounds too wet, too heavy. Jack sleeps pressed against his ribs, one paw draped over Robby’s chest like he’s holding him together by sheer force of indomitable feline will.

Dana opens the gate slowly. The latch makes a soft click. Robby stirs but doesn’t move. Jack’s eyes snap open — pale and sharp, catching the dim light like glass. “Easy, buddy,” Dana whispers. “He just needs some meds, okay? Just a checkup.”

She reaches for Robby.

Jack moves faster than she thought possible. He’s on his three feet in an instant, body between her and Robby, fur standing on end. He’s not hissing — it’s worse than that. The sound he makes is low and ragged, something primal, almost a growl but not quite. It’s a sound full of grief and warning and terror, the sound of a creature who has lost too much and *will not lose again.*

Dana freezes. She finds herself face-to-face with the small, scarred cat, the same one who once tore through two pairs of gloves and bit until his teeth met bone. But this isn’t rage. It’s something deeper, protective, and shaking, as if the idea of Robby being taken away is unbearable. Jack’s tail lashes once. His ears flatten. He makes that sound again — quieter this time, but even more desperate, like a plea wrapped in a threat.

“All right,” Dana soothes. Her hands go up, palms open. “All right, okay, Jack. I get it. I get it. He’s yours.”

Robby, wheezing, lifts his head and nudges Jack’s side, trying to soothe him. Jack leans back against him, eyes still fixed on Dana, body trembling but resolute. She steps back slowly, heart hammering. “Okay,” She says again, voice soft, almost a whisper. “You win. We’ll do it your way.”

Robby lowers his head back onto his paws. Jack crawls up against his chest and stays there, watching her until she closes the gate again. She'll find another way, she decides. Fluids through the bars, maybe, or gentle work with both of them together; as she turns out the light, she can still hear Robby's rough breathing, steady and uneven, and the faint answering rumble of Jack's purr, trying to hold his world together in the dark.

By morning, Dana has made up her mind. *If Robby can't be separated from Jack, then Jack goes with him* — simple as that. She spends half the day rearranging the far end of the sanctuary, muttering under her breath as she drags towers and ramps and beds into the largest enclosure they've got. It's usually reserved for the long-term residents — cats too wild, too wounded, or too odd to rehome. The space is wide enough for running, for climbing, for playing. Sunlight spills through the high windows, a lazy amber glow across the floor. When Dana opens the smaller enclosure, both cats watch her with sharp, synchronized eyes.

"All right, boys," She sighs softly. "You're getting an upgrade. Don't make me regret it."

Robby rises first, slow but steady, the weight of him shifting like a tide. Jack stays glued to his flank, as if afraid someone will try to steal him mid-step. Together they move — one enormous, wheezing shadow and one scarred scrap of defiance — through the sanctuary to their new quarters. The moment she closes the gate behind them, Robby explores the space with a slow, lumbering grace. He sniffs the scratching post, the tower, the tall bed by the window. Jack darts around him like a sentry, pausing to glare at Dana every few seconds, as if to make sure she understands the rules.

"Yeah, yeah," She nods, smiling. "I'm just the nurse, remember?"

The nurse with the needles.

When it's time for the medication, Dana kneels beside Robby and takes a breath. The syringe feels too big in her hand, the needle glinting faintly in the light. Robby sits, patient but watchful, as if he somehow understands what's coming. Jack's tail is already twitching, his pupils blown wide. "Easy," Dana murmurs. "You're okay, big guy." She finds the loose skin at Robby's shoulder, and inserts the needle. A tiny sting. Robby doesn't even flinch — but *Jack* does. He lets out a furious yowl, the sound scraping through the air, and snaps toward Dana's hand. She jerks back on instinct, heart racing. Jack's teeth

come perilously close to her hand.

“Jack!” She scolds, startled, tumbling backwards. “Hey, it’s okay! It’s medicine, not—” But Robby has already turned toward him. The big cat makes a low sound, almost a hum, and leans down. He catches Jack’s head under his paw, thick fur spilling over Jack’s back, and licks him once. Then again. Long, slow strokes down the side of Jack’s face. Jack growls, a weak, half-hearted sound, then collapses against Robby’s chest like a punctured balloon. The purring starts up again — sharp and trembling at first, then smoothing out, the vibration deep enough that Dana can feel it in her bones. “Good boy,” She whispers, though she’s not sure which of them she means.

She finishes the shot, gives the fluids, and checks Robby’s breathing. Jack stays pressed against him the whole time, watching every move but making no more trouble. When Dana finally stands and gathers the used supplies, both cats are already curling together again, the tension gone as if it never existed. Robby nudges Jack once, his nose brushing the small cat’s ear. Jack answers with a tiny chirp, the sound of complete trust. He’s making so many sounds she's never heard before. Jack used to communicate in hisses, now he *chirps*.

Dana leans her head against the metal bars for a moment, exhausted and relieved.

The boys rest too: Robby breathes, slow and uneven. Jack’s paw rises and falls with the rhythm of it, keeping time with his heart.

The routine settles in. Morning light, meds, food, fluids, sleep. Dana can almost set her watch by it. Robby, for his part, endures it all with quiet dignity. He’s done fighting it; he’s too tired to care. The needles, the pills, the awkward human hands — he just lets it happen, a big, stoic mountain of fur and bone who seems to understand that this is the cost of staying. His eyes have softened, though, and sometimes he looks at Dana like he’s grateful, even if it’s buried under fatigue.

Jack, on the other hand, has turned into a tiny, furious nurse.

He follows Dana’s every move during medication time, perched nearby like a one-legged supervisor. When she fills the syringe, he watches her hands with the intensity of a bomb technician. The moment she touches Robby, he’s right there, nose twitching, tail puffed in agitation, ready to object at the first sign of distress. “Jack,” Dana says one morning, voice flat, “You’re stressing me out here, pal.”

Jack blinks, unimpressed.

Robby just sighs. He takes his fluids, his pills, his pokes, and when Dana's finished, he lowers his massive head to groom the top of Jack's head like an apology for frightening him. Jack tolerates it for about three seconds before deciding it's his turn to fuss. He climbs all over Robby, snuffling around his shoulders, licking where the needle went in, biting gently at the fur as if he can erase the hurt. His movements are small and frantic, tender and bossy all at once. Robby doesn't even twitch — just lets his little cat clean him like a devoted tangerine.

"See? He's fine," Dana mutters as she packs up the supplies. "He's probably cleaner than the rest of us."

But Jack isn't done. After every treatment, he patrols. He inspects Robby's paws, his ears, his flank — every inch of him. If Robby tries to nap, Jack pokes at him until he opens one eye. If Robby doesn't eat fast enough, Jack nudges the bowl closer, then sits on his chest until he starts chewing. It's absurd, and it's beautiful. Sometimes Robby gives her this look — half exasperated, half amused — like *you see what I have to live with?* But then he nuzzles Jack, purrs low and deep, and lets himself be fussed over.

A few weeks in, Robby's breathing eases. His fur starts to shine again in patches. He's still sick, still fragile, but something about him feels steadier now. Not just his heartbeat — his *being*. Dana figures it out one afternoon as she watches them from the hallway. Jack is grooming Robby's paw with grim determination while Robby snores, oblivious. She laughs quietly to herself. "Over it, huh?" She says. "Yeah, I can see that."

Robby shifts in his sleep, one paw curling around Jack without even waking.

Jack grumbles at the movement, swats him once, then tucks himself back into the curve of that giant chest. His purr is small but fierce, the sound of a creature who refuses to let his world fall apart again.

Dana's always known that Jack doesn't trust people. Not really. Not *fully*. He tolerates her now, but only in the way wild things tolerate society — with resignation, not forgiveness. His scars tell enough of the story. The limp, the missing leg, the ragged patches where fur will never quite grow back. He came to her like that — *all bone and fight* — and though he's learned not to bite her hand every time it passes by, there's still that coiled, waiting energy in him, like a wire wound too tight. She's certain someone hit him once. Maybe more than once. She can see it in the way he flinches at raised arms, at fast movement, at

any sound that comes sharp or sudden. *Fireworks are the worst.*

Every summer, she plans for it. She darkens his old enclosure, lines it with thick towels and soft music, and doses him with the smallest bit of medication to dull the edge of his panic. The first pop in the sky sends him spiraling — scrambling, panting, his one back leg thumping against the floor as if trying to fight the sound itself.

But this year, things are different.

The evening starts like always: the world outside restless and bright, the first dull thud of fireworks in the distance. Dana feels the ripple of tension move through the sanctuary as the cats stir, ears flicking, bodies low, and somewhere in the largest enclosure, she knows Jack has already heard it. She grabs the meds and hurries down the hall.

When she gets there, she stops short.

Jack isn't panicking. He's pressed into Robby's side, small and tight, his face buried in the dense fur of Robby's neck. Robby's huge paw is draped over him, holding him close like he's sheltering a kitten. Each burst outside paints the room in brief flashes of color — red, then blue, then gold — but the two of them don't move. Jack's ears twitch with each explosion, his body quivering, but he stays there. Every time the world cracks open outside, Robby rumbles a long, deep purr, steady as the tide. It vibrates through the metal bars, through the floor, through the air itself. Jack's trembling slows.

Dana kneels. "Hey, little man. You okay?"

Jack doesn't look up. Robby does.

When she reaches for the latch, Robby's ears flatten. He opens his mouth — slow, deliberate — and hisses. It's not the sharp, mean hiss of a cat picking a fight. It's old and broken-sounding, half his teeth missing, a wheeze between the gaps. But the message is clear: *No. Mine.*

Dana freezes, hand still on the latch.

"Robby," She says softly. "It's just medicine. You know that."

He lets out another raspy hiss, louder this time. He doesn't move from Jack's side. Jack shifts against him, pressing closer, and Robby lowers his chin, tucking the smaller cat under it like a shield. A firework cracks so loudly outside that the window rattles, and Dana sees Jack's

whole body stiffen — but Robby just presses harder, humming out a sound that's halfway between a growl and a lullaby. Jack, incredibly, starts to *purr*: a tiny, shaking sound.

Dana lowers her hand, the syringe trembling slightly between her fingers. She lets out a breath. "All right," She whispers. "You win. Both of you. No meds tonight."

Robby blinks at her, slow and heavy. His jaw relaxes. Jack doesn't move.

She sits there for a moment longer, just listening — to the muted thunder of fireworks, to Robby's rough breathing, to the overlapping purrs that rise and fall like waves. The sanctuary hums with their sound.

When Dana stands, she leaves the lights dim, just in case. Behind her, in the shifting glow of color through the window, Robby curls tighter around Jack. The big cat's eyes drift closed, and Jack's head rests over his heart, right where the sound is strongest. For the first time in years, when the sky cracks open, Jack doesn't flinch.

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The morning after the Fourth always smells faintly of smoke. The air outside the sanctuary feels heavy, like the night's chaos hasn't quite finished yet. Dana unlocks the door early, still carrying that post-fireworks weariness — the way sound lingers in your bones long after it stops. Usually, this morning means clean-up: scattered litter, overturned dishes, frightened cats who spent the night hiding behind towers or wedged under blankets. She moves through the sanctuary on autopilot, murmuring greetings, checking that everyone's accounted for. A few of them peek out from their beds, wide-eyed but unharmed.

Then she reaches the big enclosure.

The first thing she notices is the stillness. Jack and Robby are where she left them — but somehow, they look different. The light is softer now, golden through the window. It spills across Robby's fur in warm patches, highlighting every tangle, every ridge of his spine. His breathing is rough but even. Jack is draped over his chest, a small, contented shape of fur and bone, his stubby leg tucked tight against Robby's flank. They're a single silhouette, so close that it's hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. Jack blinks awake as Dana approaches. For once, he doesn't startle. His eyes track her, calm and

unbothered, a little drowsy from the long night. Usually, when she comes near after something loud or frightening, his tail lashes, his pupils go wide, and his whole body goes taut. Not today.

“Morning, little man,” She says softly.

Jack yawns — an actual, honest-to-God *yawn* — and stretches across Robby’s chest, claws kneading gently at the fur and fat. Robby rumbles in his sleep, one paw flexing like he’s dreaming. Dana crouches by the bars, watching them with a kind of awe. Jack gets up after a while, slow and unhurried, gives himself a good shake, and hops down from the tower. He stretches again, then — *astonishingly* — walks right up to the front of the enclosure, to *her*.

He doesn’t hiss. He doesn’t flatten his ears. He just looks at her, his gaze steady, then flicks it toward Robby and back again, like he’s making sure she understands: *He’s still mine, but I guess you’re okay too.*

Dana laughs quietly, not wanting to wake Robby. “I see how it is.”

When she slips his breakfast dish through the slot, Jack doesn’t dart away. He takes a bite, then turns and drags a few pieces over to Robby, who’s blinking awake now, blinking slow and tired. Jack drops the food near his nose and meows, insistent, until Robby obediently chews.

Dana just shakes her head. “You’re not supposed to be his caretaker, you know.” But she’s smiling. Jack’s eyes are softer. His body language is looser. The sharp edges of him seem rounded, worn smooth by the weight of trust and love. He still startles at a noise later — a door closing somewhere down the hall — but instead of bolting, he spins and presses himself against Robby, then settles, just like that.

Dana watches them from the hallway for a long while, her arms folded, her heart full of something she doesn’t have a proper name for. When she finally turns away, she makes a mental note — *no meds for Jack anymore.* No more dark enclosures on the Fourth. Whatever he needed to survive, he’s already found it. Behind her, as the sanctuary wakes to morning, Robby and Jack curl together again, unbothered, warm in the light.

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Dana has known it’s coming for weeks. She can feel it in the way she lingers by their enclosure longer each night, the way her chest pulls when she locks up and hears Robby’s wheezy purr echo down the hall.

She's always told herself she can't keep them all — that sanctuaries are waypoints, not destinations. But some cats don't fit the rules. Some cats crawl into your ribs and stay there, they make biscuits on your heart. So on a soft, bright morning in late summer, Dana stops at the pet supply store before work. The clerk knows her by name.

"Another rescue?" He asks, half joking.

"Something like that," Dana says.

She leaves with two little green collars — *one dark moss, one camo* — and the biggest cat carrier they sell. It's absurdly huge, like luggage for a small dog, but she doesn't want to separate them. They wouldn't understand.

When she gets to the sanctuary, the building is still quiet. The air smells faintly of disinfectant and morning sun. She tucks the carrier under one arm, the collars clinking faintly together in her pocket. Jack and Robby are exactly where she knew they'd be: curled together in the middle of their favorite tower, Robby's tail dangling over the edge, Jack's chin resting squarely in the middle of Robby's chest like he owns the place. Robby's eyes open first, slow and warm, pupils narrowing against the light. Jack wakes with a snort, blinking blearily, clearly ready to protest any interruption.

Dana sets the carrier down gently. "Morning, boys," She coos. "I've got something for you."

She pulls the collars from her pocket and holds them up. "Look at these. You boys can match now. Green camo for you, Jack and Robby —" She glances at the big cat, who's blinking at her with his usual slow, unhurried patience, "—you can have the darker one."

Jack hops down first, suspicious. He sniffs the collar, then looks up at her like, *What's the catch?*

"No catch," Dana says, smiling. "You're coming home."

Robby's ears flick forward. It's hard to say whether he understands, but there's a shift in him — a small light that stirs behind those tired gold eyes. Jack circles her legs twice, tail flicking, still wary but curious now. It takes effort to get them both in the carrier. Not because they fight — they don't — but because they're *heavy* together, a tangle of limbs and fur and stubbornness. When the door clicks shut, Jack gives a questioning chirp. Robby hums to him, low and reassuring.

“It’s okay,” Dana says. “You’re not leaving. You’re just coming home with me.”

The drive to her apartment is short, but the sound of their breathing fills the car. Robby’s deep and even, Jack’s soft and quick, a duet of trust. When she carries them up the stairs — sweating, grinning, muttering about the weight of love — she opens the door to her small, sun-washed space and sets them down right in front of the window. It’s an old window, broad and square, with a fat sill and a patch of golden sunlight that shifts across the hardwood as the day goes on. She’s imagined them there for weeks.

She opens the carrier.

Robby steps out first, regal and slow, tail brushing the air. He sniffs the edge of the rug, the corner of the couch, then turns toward the light. Jack darts out right after, circles once, and launches himself onto the sill. The sun hits him square in the face, turning his scars into silver. He blinks, then starts to purr, loud enough to rattle the glass. Robby joins him a moment later. The sill creaks under his weight, but he doesn’t care. He settles in beside Jack, their sides pressed close, the light pooling across their fur like honey.

Dana stands there for a long while, just watching. Her throat feels tight, her hands still.

“This is it,” She sniffles quietly, scrubbing at her eyes. “No more cages. No more nights alone. You’re home now. No one is ever going to separate you.”

Jack turns his head and looks at her — not the quick, darting stare of a half-wild cat, but something open and certain. Then he leans forward and licks Robby’s tomcat cheek once, as if to seal the deal. Robby hums his answer. Dana laughs, soft and shaky. “Yeah,” She says. “I thought you’d agree.”

Night settles gently over her apartment. The world outside hums low — a car passing, a door shutting somewhere far off — but inside, everything is warm. The TV is still playing in the living room. Someone on the screen is laughing, the clatter of bowls and the low hum of the Bake-Off theme filling the space like background music to peace. Dana moves through her small apartment barefoot, her hair down, her heart loose in her chest in a way it hasn’t been in years. The cats have been exploring all evening. Robby’s enormous tail swiped half the books off the shelf; Jack knocked a plant over and

glared at the dirt like it offended him personally. Now the mess has been half cleaned, the lights dimmed, the night soft around the edges.

Dana brushes her teeth, turns off the kitchen light, and pads toward her bedroom. The room smells faintly of laundry and cat fur and lemon soap.

When she pulls back the comforter, she laughs out loud.

There they are.

Two warm, sprawling shapes in the middle of her bed. Robby has claimed the lion's share — a great, soft heap of chocolate fur taking up the center, one paw draped over the pillow like he's been here his whole life. Jack is curled against him, almost invisible, just a small orange smudge against the big cat's chest. Their purring is steady and overlapping, a soft rolling sound that fills the air like the ocean.

"Well," Dana smiles. "Guess I'm sleeping with you guys tonight."

Robby opens one eye, slow and gleaming, then closes it again. Jack stretches, blinks up at her, and makes that little chirp he only uses now — the one that means *you're late, but it's fine.*

She climbs in carefully, easing into the small sliver of space left to her. Robby shifts just enough to make room, a slow, heavy movement that presses his warmth against her legs. Jack crawls up the blanket, turns twice, and settles by her ribs, his stubby leg tucked tight. The TV hums on from the other room, someone narrating about caramel layers and sponge texture. The sound drifts softly through the door.

Dana closes her eyes.

The rhythm of their breathing becomes her lullaby — Robby's deep and labored but steady, Jack's lighter, a counterpoint. The warmth sinks into her bones. She feels the weight of them, the trust, the strange little miracle of being chosen by two creatures who have learned to love again.

Outside, the city *speaks*. Inside, everything is *quiet*.

Robby breathes out, a sound like a sigh and a purr tangled together. Jack presses closer. Dana smiles into the dark.

"Goodnight, boys," She whispers. "Welcome home."

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